

Know your history. know it well

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Comment

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MALAYSIA will celebrate its 52nd year of Merdeka tomorrow, and it is timely to reflect on what has happened since the nation gained independence in 1957.

Amidst the joy and fanfare, there must be a serious revisit to the history of the events that led to this annual celebration.

They say, history is a great teacher. But unless this is done in earnest, Merdeka tends to have a repetitive dampening effect in which the context is largely lost.

It will be reduced to a one-time cyclical happening, devoid of any meaning.

And once the bright lights go off, the event will be totally forgotten.

With it goes the commitment to take stock of what must be done to buttress Merdeka as a platform to create a genuinely sovereign nation.

More recently, Datuk Dr Sharom Ahmat during his acceptance address as a recipient of a honorary doctorate in philosophy at the last Universiti Sains Malaysia Convocation, reminded us again of the importance of history.

"History preserves the concept of identity, society, balance and through this we remember who we are and where we come from," he said.

"It is crucial therefore, to never change history, memories and our heritage."

Sharom recognised that history is to a society like memories are to an individual. It is, therefore, a vital guide on how we ought to live in the present and in the future.

Without such memories, an individual becomes isolated and will have no idea of his roots and where he is in the present.

"As such, I hope that history will be given priority in tandem with other studies considered important in determining the rise and fall of a nation."

In short, whether we realise it or not, history has a material bearing on a country's future; and pleading ignorance is not an option.

Those who are blind to history are surely to cause unwarranted obstacles to nation-building. For one, the formation of Malaysia (in the spirit of 1Malaysia) is an event that we cannot afford to ignore or be oblivious to.

Along with it are events like the separation of Singapore from the Federation, as all these have had a big impact on all of us.

The book *Jinnah-India, Partition, Independence* released just a fortnight ago, is fast becoming a best-seller precisely because of its historical value and honesty.

It reminded us again why knowing the "truth" through history is vital.

The author, India's former external affairs minister, Jaswant Singh, recalls the events leading to the partition of the subcontinent.

At one point he wrote: "The cruel truth is that this partitioning of India has actually resulted in achieving the very reverse of the originally intended purpose; partition, instead of settling contention between communities has left us a legacy of markedly enhanced Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or other such denominational identities, hence differences..."

The British were regarded as an ever willing midwife in tandem with the practice of divide-and-rule tactics. Although many applauded the book as an impeccable scholarly work, the author, a senior leader of India's main opposition party, was unceremoniously expelled two days after the book was launched.

Others called for a boycott, especially when some of the revelations were deemed unpalatable to the interests of the current politics.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and his first home minister, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, for example, were alleged to be

responsible for the country's partition in 1947, together with Muhamad Ali Jinnah, the founder-father of Pakistan.

To cast Jinnah as "being the ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity, the liberal constitutionalist and Indian nationalist to the Quaid-e-Azam of Pakistan", is to many Indians just politically incorrect.

But such is the role of history in teasing out the "truth" for us to learn from, no matter what is politically correct.

Sadly, however, many a time we prefer to wallow in ignorance and champion the narrow vested interest of partisan politics.

All history gets is a back seat, if at all. Consequently, our history is often haunted by its own ghosts created to feed uninformed minds, especially the impressionable ones who regard Merdeka as no more than a one-day event of hoisting and waving flags.

After 52 years of almost the same, it is time to get rid of the ghosts and start anew. We need to find answers to some of the whys and why-nots, in order that we understand and not repeat any of the follies of yesteryear.

Merdeka must be the defining moment for all of us to seriously contemplate on how to do better. And this needs more than just the usual song and dance.

Salam Merdeka to all Malaysians!

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